Strategic Association Treaty (SAT)

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Introduction

In a context of rising international tensions, shifting alliances, and increasing pressure on global supply chains, European strategic autonomy has moved to the centre of policy debates. The European Union is confronted with a fundamental question: should it prioritise internal consolidation or expand its strategic reach through external partnerships?

This proposal argues that framing enlargement as a binary choice between "bigger" or "better" constitutes a false dilemma. While internal reform remains essential, it is insufficient to address the EU's structural vulnerabilities. At the same time, traditional enlargement, if pursued without careful planning, risks increasing fragmentation and political deadlock.

We therefore propose a third approach: a structured and pragmatic model of cooperation with selected strategic partners, based on gradual and sector-specific integration without requiring full accession.

Background

The European Union currently faces a structural dilemma. Should it improve through internal reforms or grow through external cooperation? Our proposal argues that these objectives are not contradictory. In line with the Draghi Report's1 diagnosis of Europe's competitiveness, demographic, and investment crises, the European Union will no longer have sufficient fiscal capacity, political consensus, or demographic dynamism to address the multiple simultaneous challenges alone. Expanding structured cooperation with strategically significant partners can strengthen the EU's resilience, market capacity and bargaining power. Rather than relying on the politically constrained accession framework, this proposal adopts a functional, pragmatic approach to cooperation. The objectives are not political convergence nor immediate membership, but the creation of durable, resilient economic and strategic interdependence in areas of mutual benefit. Türkiye is the most relevant pilot case due to its strategic geopolitical position and strategic relevance in the trade, defence, and energy sectors.

Legal Framework

The proposed Strategic Associated Treaty (SAT) is based on the existing legal framework of the European Union. The main legal basis of our proposal is Article 217 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)2. This treaty allows the European Union to make association agreements with third countries involving mutual rights and obligations. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) also provides an authorization for developing partnerships within the EU's external sphere3.

1 European Commission (2024), *The Future of European Competitiveness (Draghi Report)*.

2 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), Article 217.

3 Treaty on European Union (TEU), Article 21.

The SAT also draws inspiration from existing treaties such as the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, showcasing the practicability of a flexible, sector-based cooperation beyond the full membership4.

The principles of the subsidiarity justifies EU-level action, as defence, energy and market integration requires coordination beyond the member state level. The proposal ensures that measures are limited to necessities to achieve the objectives and are appropriate. The SAT limits cooperation to clearly defined sectors without extending to a full accession process.

Proposal

This proposal would be established by the Strategic Association Treaty (SAT):

4 European Commission (2023), *EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement*, Brussels.

This new cooperation framework aims to bring back the original spirit of European integration, when the EU, then the CECA, was built on pragmatic, sectoral, and mutually beneficial cooperation. Inspired by the original functional logic of European integration, this proposal reconfigures enlargement, making it a strategic tool for the Union in light of contemporary geopolitical realities. It further aligns with the broader direction outlined in the Draghi Report, emphasising pragmatism and strategic autonomy for the EU5. It constitutes a practical example of a comprehensive, cross-sector framework agreement. Importantly, this mechanism is designed to enhance the European Union's strategic autonomy rather than that of individual member states.

This framework constitutes a strategic necessity for the European Union in an increasingly complex global environment. By enabling flexible, interest-driven cooperation in key domains,

5 European Commission (2023), *EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement*, Brussels.

such as defence, energy, security, and trade, the EU can strengthen its strategic autonomy while reinforcing internal cohesion and long-term strategic direction.

Case study: Türkiye

The proposed Strategic Association Treaty (SAT)'s most realistic and strategically valuable application is the Republic of Türkiye. Among all neighbouring countries of the EU, Türkiye stands out as the closest in terms of geography, institutional connectivity, market integration, military relevance, and energy infrastructure. For these reasons, Türkiye constitutes the strongest case study for the implementation of a sector-based, Strategic Association Framework.

Unlike other distant strategic partners or less-integrated candidate states, Türkiye already has pre-existing legal and practical links to the European Union, including the Customs Union, candidate-country status, NATO-linked security structures, growing defence cooperation with EU member states, and recent financial integration proposals, such as inclusion in SEPA. These existing foundations make Türkiye the most realistic case for applying the SAT as a structured framework for gradual cooperation beyond the politically overloaded and complicated accession process.

At present, the EU-Türkiye relations remain excessively constrained from the perspective of accession politics. In practice, nearly all bilateral discussions are interpreted as part of full membership, which has generated long-standing mistrust and political stagnation on both sides. The accession process has become increasingly burdened by disputes over Cyprus, human rights, and migration, making it an ineffective channel for advancing mutual strategic interests. At the same time, both the European Union and Türkiye continue to face common security, energy and economic challenges that require coordination regardless of the accession issue. For this reason, the SAT framework seeks to decouple practical cooperation from the membership equation, instead building upon already existing areas of integration.

The first pillar of the SAT pilot implementation focuses on economic and market integration through the modernisation of the existing Customs Union. This is the most immediate and feasible step. Extending the Customs Union to include services, finance, digital markets, and selected agricultural sectors would significantly deepen economic interdependence and strengthen regulatory frameworks aligned with EU standards. Such expansion would benefit the Union by

increasing market capacity, supply-chain resilience, and regulatory influence, while also providing Türkiye with greater access to European markets, investment flows, and long-term economic predictability and stability.

The second pillar, and the central pillar, concerns defence and security cooperation, which is the main strategic proposal. Türkiye's geopolitical location at the crossroads of Europe, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East makes it indispensable to any broader European security schematics. Its military manpower, operational experience in conflict zones on the globe, rapidly advancing defence industry, and internationally recognised expertise in drone warfare, air defence, and naval systems make it a highly valuable strategic partner. In the context of the EU's growing ambition for strategic autonomy and reduced dependence

on Atlantic partners, closer cooperation with Turkey in defence industrial production, logistics supply chains, joint technological development, intelligence coordination, and Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean security would create mutual benefits.

The third pillar concerns energy and infrastructure cooperation. Türkiye's role as an energy hub linking Europe with the Caspian basin, Central Asia, and Gulf routes offers a critical opportunity for long-term diversification. In light of recent instability affecting maritime transit routes and geopolitical volatility at the borders, EU investments in pipelines, electricity interconnections, renewable energy, and grid expansion through Türkiye would significantly increase European energy resilience.

Taken together, these three pillars make Türkiye the strongest candidate for the application of the Strategic Association Treaty. It highlights how the EU can expand its functional sphere of cooperation without relying on the politically stalled accession process.

Implementation of the SAT

Impact assessment:

If implemented, the Strategic Association Treaty would signal a significant change in how the EU wields influence and conducts its relationships with other countries outside of Europe. The EU would gain a new tool to develop diplomatic relations that would not require member states to choose between becoming a full member of the EU or being a loose partner through other means. The SAT would be a new way for the EU to successfully develop diplomatic relations at a time when the EU's expansion strategy is seen to have stalled. It would also assist the European Union in strengthening its position as an independent entity by reducing its dependence on each member state's bilateral agreements with other countries and consolidating the EU's external relations. In Türkiye, a strong SAT would publicly demonstrate the EU as a major player in the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Caucasus regions, and would provide an alternative to the Russian and Chinese spheres of influence in those areas. Overall, the SAT will show the EU to be a pragmatic force on a global level that is able to form structured, mutually beneficial partnerships and reinforcing the EU's existing normative belief system. This new form of cooperation shows that the EU is not an organisation in decline but an organisation that is actively working to redefine itself in a world that is becoming increasingly diverse and competitive.

Challenges

The Strategic Association Treaty faces three principal obstacles. First, member state vetoes remain the most immediate political barrier. Greece and Cyprus have historically blocked Türkiye's participation in EU defence mechanisms, citing unresolved sovereignty disputes. While the

application of Qualified Majority Voting partially mitigates this constraint, these tensions are unlikely to be fully bypassed.

Second, concerns over human rights conditionality and potential democratic backlash may generate a legitimacy challenge, particularly as the SAT develops cooperation without clearly defined democratic benchmarks. This could create an immediate risk of domestic opposition to further integration.

Lastly, political pressure may push the SAT to expand into migration, an area explicitly excluded from this proposal. To mitigate these risks, the SAT must include clearly defined treaty provisions alongside structured, enforceable review mechanisms.

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